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Sen. Laura Toy's bill to create advisory board for Detroit Water & Sewerage Department passed by Senate

LANSING – Legislation that would require the city of Detroit to establish an advisory board to provide accountability and transparency to its water system passed the Senate today, said Sen. Laura M. Toy, 6th District.

“It’s time to shine the spotlight on the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department and ensure there’s more accountability in how it operates,” Sen. Toy said. “Half the state of Michigan is served by the department and changes are needed. My legislation isn’t a takeover of the department, but a way to ensure that the water department’s operations are reviewed and that recommendations for improvements are made.

“We need to keep customers’ interests in mind not only in the rate setting process, but also in terms of efficiency, best practices and security issues,” Sen. Toy continued. “At town-hall meetings, and in countless e-mails, letters, and phone calls from across southeast Michigan, what has come forward is how this system is out of control and needs another pair of eyes and ears to make it better and to give the customers it serves comfort in its governance instead of the suspicion that currently exists in the some 126 communities serviced by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department.”

Among other things, the advisory board created by Sen. Toy’s bill would be responsible for ensuring that rates charged for water and sewer service are just and reasonable. Her legislation would also require that advance notice of rate increases be provided to customers and would allow only one rate increase during any 12-month period.

“We have reached out to both sides and the bill has changed because of the recommendations made by all parties involved,” Sen. Toy said. “Hopefully the end result is a bill that will help alleviate the concerns of water users in southeast Michigan by creating a water accountability advisory board.”

Despite several requests by Sen. Toy and others dating back to 2003, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department and the Southeast Michigan Consortium for Water Quality – a body formed by a federal judge with oversight of the department – have failed to provide a comprehensive audit of the water system’s rate setting and contracting processes.

The governor vetoed similar legislation three years ago arguing that there were less drastic alternatives to address what she referred to as “the problems that have been identified with the water system.”

“This time I hope the governor signs this important piece of legislation into law,” Sen. Toy said. “Detroit Water and Sewerage customers throughout all of southeastern Michigan deserve it.”

The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department has been plagued by a long history of higher-than inflation rate increases and questionable contracting practices.

Though opponents of her bill claim that things are improving at the department, Sen. Toy has stated that the residents she serves and countless others throughout southeast Michigan are not convinced. She said the oversight that would be provided by her bill is needed to alleviate those concerns.

“I have worked very hard on this issue over the past three years, and others before me have tried to address the problems at the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department as well,” Sen. Toy said. “Three decades is long enough to wait.”

Senate Bill 372 will now be sent to the House of Representatives for consideration.

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Note: Audio comments from Sen. Toy are available on the senator’s Web site, www.senate.michigan.gov/gop/audiowire/toy.